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Infinite Liability

The Jews, lamenters say, failed to draw the right lesson from their sufferings in the Holocaust.

By Kathleen Hayes

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It's hard to respond to a sigh dressed in sage sorrow at man's perfidy. The Jews, lamenters say, failed to draw the right lesson from their sufferings in the Holocaust. Having been the victims of one genocide, they hastened to wage their own on another hapless people, the Palestinians. Even more perverse, these observers grieve, the Jews brandish their torments in the Holocaust as a sort of all-purpose get-out-of-jail-free card — a carte blanche for carnage, which the Jews expect the world to observe forever.

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It sounds so virtuous, and especially poignant when it comes from a Jew. These men and women often invoke their Jewish day schools and summer camps and trips to Israel, or even their Israeli citizenship, to give their sadness extra heft. Peter Beinart is probably the most prominent of this sort, but there are many others. I have no reason to think they are deliberately insincere. It's just curious what an eager reception exists for these Jews' damning charges against their own people.

The latest in the endless Jews-as-genocidal-maniacs effluvium is found in the New York Review of Books (NYRB), where the bien-pensants go for intellectual cleansing. I remember it fondly as a journal guaranteed to make me feel smarter, rather than where I learn with sinking heart that yet another of my favorite writers hates the Jews.

I didn't know of Omer Bartov, the author of the recent NYRB piece "Infinite License," but he has impeccable credentials for the I-don't-hate-Jews-I-only-hate-Zionists crowd: He was born in Israel to Jews of Polish background, and is a historian of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Brown University. When Bartov says Israel is committing a genocide against the Palestinians, it sounds tremendously authoritative. Yet it really should occur to someone, not least a historian, that Israel has been impugned as latter-day Nazis, intent on turning another people into the defenseless Jew, at least since the

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starved Jews released from Auschwitz than fevered minds already speculated that they'd try to exploit their suffering for their malignant advantage.

Nothing shakes Bartov's suggestion that the Palestinians are all innocents, monstrously assailed by a wantonly marauding Israel. He writes that Israel saw the Hamas attack of Oct. 7 "as confirmation that the militant group was utterly savage and barbaric;" that since Oct. 7 "many Jews — not just in Israel but in the Diaspora — feel that they live under genocidal threat;" and that "Hamas militants are seen as modern-day Nazis," but never wonders whether a person might have good reason, based on gruesome facts, to think and feel these things. There's scant mention of Palestinian terrorism, and none of Israel's vulnerability to its vastly more numerous Arab neighbors; the Palestinians' longstanding refusal to accept a state in return for recognizing Israel; or Gazans' well-documented support for genocidal antisemitism. In his view of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the only autonomous actors are the Jews, and the things they do to make others hate them.

"The memory of the Holocaust has, perversely, been enlisted to justify both the eradication of Gaza and the extraordinary silence with which that violence has been met," Bartov writes. At least concerning the latter part of this sentence, he's quite right. Aside from the huge marches howling for intifada; the flood of denunciations by the U.N., International Criminal Court accusers and powerful NGOs; the condemnatory newspaper editorials and nonstop anti-Israel coverage; the spike in physical attacks on Jews; the swastikas popping up like mushrooms on Jewish establishments; the pious Hollywood speeches and red-hand pins; the campus encampments; the protesters yanking Sabra hummus off supermarket shelves; and a zillion or so indictments on social media, there's hardly been a peep about Israel's war in Gaza.

But it's Bartov's central claim that the memory of the Holocaust has been "enlisted" to justify the unjustifiable that is so insidious, particularly coming from a professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Then again, there's a tipoff to Bartov's perspective in his academic title. Not so long ago, the Nazis' attempt to murder all the Jews was considered worthy of its own discipline, and "Holocaust Studies" was born. Soon, however, a squeamishness set in. Why, some asked, should the Jews get so much attention for their particular suffering? What about the world's many other genocides, the ethnic cleansing of the Native Americans, the enslaved and murdered Africans, the brutal carnage carried out under colonialism? Although it's hard to imagine, say, an African-American Studies Department being chided that their purview must include the Uighurs, because they too experience slavery today, it wasn't hard to convince academia that Jewish suffering only merits attention if it sheds light

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born.

As Alvin H. Rosenfeld writes in his insightful and disturbing book "The End of the Holocaust," the aim of using the Nazi genocide for "programs that will derive some good from all that bad" may be commendable. But, he suggests, ineluctably "the overwhelmingly destructive history of the Holocaust" is steadily eroded as a focus of concern. This decentering is part of a broader assault on Holocaust memory. Critics either attack the Holocaust outright as a supposed fabrication; or they claim the Jews exaggerate the numbers killed; or they allege that Jews died of disease or the natural consequences of war rather than a deliberate program of extermination; or they charge that the Zionists were the Nazis' collaborators so the real villains; or they minimize it by saying it wasn't any worse than other holocausts suffered by other people. The accumulated force of these tendencies, Rosenfeld writes, may bring about "the end of Auschwitz": the end of any meaningful memory of the Holocaust, and its appropriation and distortion to use against its victims.

This is what Bartov, historian of the Holocaust, is contributing to. Academia is, of course, where the recognition of material reality goes to die. But it should occur to anyone with a passing knowledge of history that the Holocaust established at least two things: first, that it is possible for a modern political movement to envision and pursue the aim of murdering every last Jew; and second, that the continued survival of the Jews mandates they have a state, as other people have a state. Saying this isn't "exploiting the memory of the Holocaust"; it's learning from it. Instead we have the steady drip-drip of those intent on drawing other lessons from this horrific chapter in history, silencing its victims and turning the indictment on a new generation.

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